

OUR PROJECT: THE “POPULAR ARCHITECTURE IN PORTUGAL”. A CRITICAL LOOK. INTERCALAR RESULTS OF A RESEARCH PROJECT.

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Abstract

The research project we are developing is centered on the critical study of Popular Architecture in Portugal volume, published in 1961 by the Architects' Union. This subject was chosen not only for the importance of the survey on which it is based for the history of Portuguese architectural culture, but also because we consider that the critical discussion prompted by the survey maintains its relevance unaltered, now that the debates on vernacular and regionalism have re-entered the agenda of professional debates.

Even so, Popular Architecture in Portugal is not being study in isolation, in and for itself. Instead, we chose to study it within a pondered framework, dialoguing with theoretical elements underlying the expressiveness of some modern architectural erudite languages.

Within this framework, Pedro Vieira de Almeida (2010) brought in two complementary key analytical variants of this project. He considered them as “parameters in sordina”:

*Firstly, the notion of the generic importance for architectural expression of greater or lesser degree of **thickness** of the walls, shaping what might be called a poetics of thin walls on the one hand, and a poetics of thick walls on the other.*

*Secondly, the notion of **transition-space's** architectural expressiveness key significance.*

This paper aims to present the current state of our research project, bringing its core working lines and results into discussion.

Keywords: Survey, Vernacular Architecture, Modern Architecture, Portuguese Architecture

The Popular Architecture in Portugal. A Critical Look, which we are now presenting, was set as a research project in late 2008 to be developed between April 2010 and March 2013, under the coordination of Pedro Vieira de Almeida.

The proposal and assumptions on which this project relied, were being equated by Pedro for some time. As the project took form they achieved a wider critical dimension, for concerns were no longer individual, but shared within a team work.

Two distinct yet complementary focus were encompassed by this project (1) the Survey taken as object of study and (2) the Survey used as a pretext for theoretical reflection.

The latter holds all theoretical reflexion on architectural expressiveness which takes as key analytical variants of this project what PVA considers the '*parameters in sordina*':

Firstly, the notion of the generic importance of greater or lesser degree of the **thickness** vector, in the field of architectural expressiveness, and what its degree of incidence on vernacular architecture and erudite architecture, shaping what might be called a *poetics of thin walls* on the one hand, and a *poetics of thick walls* on the other.

Secondly, the real expressive meaning of the notion **space-transition** in structuring the idea of "habitation", understanding space-transition, an in-between space defined as being simultaneously interior and exterior.

This reflection brought by Pedro to the project goes far beyond the aspects directly linked to the *Inquérito à Arquitectura Regional Portuguesa* [Survey on Portuguese Regional Architecture]. Indeed, it is deeply rooted in broader theoretical and critical concerns.

To the date of his death, Pedro was writing *Cadernos 1 e 2* (Almeida, 2011; 2011a), in which he sought to define the theoretical basis of the project. This work was meant to clarify his theoretical position, as he was trying to net in a reasoned discourse various research interests (modernity, modernism/post-

modernism, post-modernity, on the one hand, and identity, vernacular, heritage and globalization, on the other). Pedro was also recovering his early studies on space in architecture.

The richness of this work and the need to respect authorship, led us to choose to limit this first paper to a presentation of intercalary results of the project, leaving the influential contribute of Pedro to a second paper dedicated to his thoughts on the *Survey*¹. It is important to note that, despite not being present, Pedro Vieira de Almeida is also author of the work now being presented.

The Survey as object of study

The study of the Survey covered several aspects, including a new reading and identification of problems associated with it; a critical review of the historiography on the subject (Cardoso, Maia 2010) and an attempt to understand its significance in contemporary architectural culture, both nationally and internationally, which is the genesis of this Conference.

One should begin by noticing that although the publication of the Survey under the title *Arquitectura Popular em Portugal* [Popular Architecture in Portugal] currently achieved its 4th edition, and despite the fact that it is being widely mentioned by all sorts of texts devoted to Portuguese architecture, information on it was relatively scarce.

Available, and commonly referenced information is often concerned with three major issues: 1) identification of the genealogy of the Survey in its articulation with the problem of *Portuguese House* (França 1970); 2) its relation to the 1st National Congress of Architecture promoted in 1948; and 3) its relation to the '*Architecture*' journal (Portas 1978). We might add to those matters the attempt to assess its influence, especially in what concerns the so-called *third way* followed by the Portuguese modern architecture (Portas 1978), a subject that is

¹ See in this Conference Proceedings Leal, Maia and Cardoso, *Pedro Vieira de Almeida and the Survey*

attracting most references, perhaps due to the international projection that this architecture has reached today.

The liaison with the political system is part of those aspects. The ambiguous relationship established between architects and the dictatorship of Salazar, was interpreted as an act of resistance (Pereira 2000) supported by subtle ingenious misunderstandings (Portas 1978). This reading needs, as far as we are concerned, to be considered in a wider context: that of general relations between architecture, architects and power during *Estado Novo* (Cardoso, Maia 2011) this being a rather polemical issue in the context of national historiography (see Pereira, Fernandes 1987; Pereira 2000; Almeida, Maia 1986, Almeida 1998).

On the other hand, some authors (Almeida, 2002 Cardoso, 2005; Filgueiras 1986; Mendes 1987) mention the strong cultural influence of geography and anthropology. As is well known contact with Orlando Ribeiro and Jorge Dias' team was especially relevant to the northern teams working in the Survey. This fact, turned out to have international consequences, through the choices made for the study submitted by the Portuguese delegation to the X CIAM Congress in Dubrovnik in 1956, under the title *Plan for a Rural Community in Trás-os-Montes*.

From our point of view, since here one could anticipate the articulation between *critical regionalism and critical internationalism* that Pedro has been building from Carlos Ramos' quotation of Emile Schreiber '(...) *international penetration, national interpretation, this is the whole secret of harmony in the world of tomorrow.*' (1986).

In contrast, Survey's contribution to anthropology through the record of a largely disappearing rural Portugal has been stressed (Pereira, 2000), as well as its importance as a photographic document for the history of Portuguese photography (Sena, 1998).

Conversely, attention was never given to the methodological aspects of the Survey. It is important to stress the historiographical unawareness to this point,

as we believe that it should be thoroughly analyzed. Indeed, one of the biggest problems in reading and interpreting the Survey is that no methodological homogeneity whatsoever bonds the work of the six teams that have done it.

This absence of a common method reflects itself in the total lack of unity of the Survey (Almeida 1986). Moreover, the authors' desire to find the diversity in Portuguese traditional architecture, conditioned their look *'to read what in the country are permanencies, not only in time but also in space'* (Almeida 2008: 110).

As rightly noted by the geographer Orlando Ribeiro (1998, XVI) *'there are two ways to look at the rapid transformations the world goes through. Many see mostly the changes, others try to catch out what, despite them, stays the same'*

A first approach to the Survey's graphic material immediately highlights the non-systematic notation used zone by zone which in itself makes it difficult for a comparative analysis of the findings. In addition, the lack of uniformity in the characterization of the different architectural types, according to individual criteria, makes it impossible to read the global set of maps that have been published.

It was therefore crucial for our study to treat all the existing documentation to be read as a whole, what led us to match in a single map the boundaries of the zones that were surveyed.

Apart from an obvious excess of information, this exercise permitted us to realize that the lack of the typological map of Zone 5, Alentejo, would not allow an information set. To address this gap we decided to make a sketch map, based on a regional chart annotated by this zone team², trying to identify in the territory the location of the examples collected or referred to in the text. In this task, the symbols and the characterization employed for these types were based on similar criteria of approach, which we presume have identified in all the three teams from the south. Note that these teams were particularly sensitive to the constructive and formal aspects of rural housing.

² It is the regional division of the Zone [5], according to Prof. Amorim Girão *Esboço duma Carta Regional de Portugal* published by team's zone 5 (*Arquitectura Popular em Portugal*, 1961:512)

After treating digitally all charts and typological maps associated in an interactive database - an operating tool that allows successive approximations for clearing up information – and recorded the various elements that were considered significant by the six teams of architects, it was possible to account for the 82 symbols employed. The most representative examples of popular architecture in Portugal were then translated in different types of buildings (dwellings, services, markets, collective equipment, chapels,...).

In the first stage of systematization, some elements were excluded, for they did not seem relevant to the critical research being developed. As a result, structures with greater character inducer of collective life **-habitation-** were highlighted. The structures which have only a utility induced of collective life, or without direct architectural value, were removed³. Currently, a set of 53 different types of dwellings is identified.

With these 'cleaner' maps, it was now possible to select areas for first visits of key points, which without excessive detail allowed collecting information in the field, thus validating the choice of those areas to be worked more consistently.

This *in loco* approach in Zone 4 (Estremadura), which is rich in examples provided with *thin walls*, and Zone 3 (Beiras), which is expected to host examples of *thick walls* and *space-transition* has not been particularly useful on this last parameter, because many of the examples registered by the Survey have disappeared. However there are still some cases that allow the crossing with the graphic information, so it is important to check them in the field.

In a second stage of systematization, an attempt was made to group in the same typological classification examples of dwellings separately understood and presented as distinctive by the Survey. For it seemed to us that no analytical advantage was coming from this option. A good example of this is Zone 1, where farmhouses are singled out individually and Zone 2 with several variations of dwellings with balcony.

³ At this stage we decided to keep the pilgrimage chapels (zone 1) and the chapels with porch (zone 2) as a possible hypothesis to study the notion of space-transition..

This approach to examples of vernacular architecture is not intended to be a renewed survey, but an intentional and conscious approach meant to verify the working hypotheses formulated in advance: **thickness** and **space-transition** as expressive values.

Beyond the immediate graphics consequences, this work phase has a component of critical interpretation of those elements, which requires a careful theoretical framework for the options to be taken.

We hope that the release of information, currently being worked on new summary-maps covering the six zones will eventually allow an integrated reading of the entire national territory. From this information, we expect results that enable us to formulate a typological redefinition about the examples held in the 'Survey' and to start a refreshed critical dialogue between erudite and vernacular fields in general architectural language.

Currently, we are in a crucial phase of our research, not only because we are now proceeding to critically oriented recognitions, but also because it simultaneously represents a moment, particularly delicate, that requires attention and disciplined sensitivity to the examples to find. These will support the kind of expressive elements in the architectural language that we propose to analyze, i.e., the importance of '**wall thickness**' in the determination of interior space and the social significance of '**space-transition**' in the socialization of home. (Almeida 2011a)

For the objectivity of this particular reading, it is important to count on a universe of a 'stabilized' work, as is the case of the architectures that the "Survey" specifically refers to. Furthermore, and because they are examples of vernacular architecture, they have in our opinion the additional advantage of holding an architectural expression '*spontaneous, popular, genuine character, in the sense of being culturally candid, and not being dominated by erudite ideas*' (Almeida, 2010: 12).

Finally, it is our intention to pay a tribute, now that 50 years have passed since the Survey was brought forward, to its authors and promoters, since we believe

that to this date the Survey on Portuguese Regional Architecture hasn't been critically studied, as it deserved.

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